

OBITUARY

## In Memoriam P. A. Allum (22.7.1933 – 28.4.2022)

Felia Allum and Luciano Brancaccio



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He waited for us to return to start his last short journey. Dad had dementia. He was 88 years old, going on 89 which he would have celebrated in July. He/we had been living with the disease for the last 15 years with mum looking after him with all the love she had for him. As an intergenerational household, we promised each other that however badly the disease would develop we would keep him at home safe. Mum carried on taking him to France and Italy, to the cinema, to exhibitions in London, to beautiful landscapes. She even organised an exhibition of his artwork entitled 'Water' in Reading, June- July 2018, the town where he lived. He continued to leave us slowly while still being present. He once told my youngest daughter when she was crying that his shoulder was always there for her. They had a great complicity and towards the end of his life, she was the *one* who would sing to him, hold his hand, read to him, give him a high five and cuddle him. In this way, he was in constant contact with the young as he had been with his students throughout his university career, although she regretted not knowing him in his prime as Professor Percy ALLUM.

Covid probably changed all of this. It made the world a smaller place for him and it speeded up some of his symptoms which had until then been rather slow to develop. He was more in his own world, spoke a lot less if ever, he repeated your words slowly looking at your lips, saw shapes and colours where there were none. Now, he was going away more rapidly while still being here. It was hard for all of us but he remained kind, soft, tender, smiley. He was still my dad throughout, and I was very lucky to be able to care for him in the last two years of his life. I made sure that he was clean, safe, fed, and warm.

In the end, he gave me the best possible present: to be able to sit next to his bed, sing to him and caress his face as he drew his last breaths on that Thursday morning. Slowly, deeply, serenely. His last look was for my mother, a look full of love and humanity. I will never forget it. He was still my dad, *mon papa*, but it was tiring, I am emotionally and physically drained because I had a full-time job as well as two teenagers to look after. I became what is called 'a sandwich carer' looking after both my elderly parents and teenagers at the same time. But, it has been a very humanising experience to care for a loved one in such a way, to develop more emotional empathy and kindness.

Dad was a man of his generation, he had no mobile phone, no computer, no email address. He communicated via drawings, handwritten letters, land line or face to face meetings. To think that he wrote the whole of his DPhil thesis in 1966 using an *Olivetti Lettera 22* typewriter. He was an old time academic who had no personal ambition, no ego to push as so many academics have today. He believed in knowledge not university politics nor squashing colleagues or ignoring important research. He was a principled academic who believed in his research ideas who spoke out against the Apartheid regime, the Vietnam war and campaigned for nuclear disarmament. He was left wing to the core.

Percy believed in deep dives rather than the superficial studies which the modern REF system forces academics to work to. Dad did not mass produce but what he did, left a footprint. All his works about Naples have impacted a whole generation of Neapolitan intellectuals like no other English or American academic has. Although he often focused on Naples and Italy, in his teaching he was a comparativist of western Europe, comparing France, Italy, UK, Germany, and Spain. He had studied in France and the UK and had researched Italy so managed easily to draw out comparisons and empirical detail for his students in his classes. In the UK, younger and more ambitious academics appeared and never really acknowledged his worth or contribution but in Italy, he remains a respected voice<sup>1</sup> nationally and locally in Naples for his ideas and contribution to our understanding of Italian/Neapolitan politics and society. This intellectual ignoring which in a way undermines one's academic standing has seriously affected other colleagues, but it didn't touch dad because he did not care about the university game or

academic circus. He knew his worth and if anyone reads his books or articles, they too would discover some interesting analytical arguments about Italy and Western Europe.

I recently re-discovered the letters he sent his parents as a young man travelling across Europe during the 1950s. For us today, they are a travel blog, a snapshot of post war Europe, his testimony like his drawings, full of detail and insightful analysis of the changing world he observed. In a way, fulfilling what one of his school teachers wished for him when encouraging his parents to allow him to go to university: *'to enable him to become a more complete citizen of the world (the first reasons for Universities)'*.

In many of his letters<sup>2</sup>, he describes his first encounter with Naples and the beginning of a love affair which would span over 60 years, not only as a researcher but also as an artist. His many pictures and drawings of Naples are this, a gift. I do now wonder whether, as recent research suggests, your life passes in front of you while you are dying, I do wonder whether these were some of the scenes he replayed:

## NAPLES

*When the weather is cold and unpleasant people light fires in the streets, on the pavements in tins or large ones in the middle of the street. As far as I know fireplaces are unknown in Naples, certainly I've not seen one, nor a chimney pot even. It is quite fascinating to walk the streets at night and watch the people crowd round. The continual movement and sparkle entrances all from cradle to infirmity. It is easy to understand how Rome burnt under Nero. It surprises me that there are not accidents. There may be, but there are, certainly no sign of them (Naples, 1956).*

*In the afternoon, I visited the family of a friend with him. They were as kind and as generous as all Neapolitan families seem to be. I seemed to spend most of my time translating English songs on gramophone records into Italian. This hospitality has one edge, because if you look at a Neapolitan girl 'more than twice' as it were, you are considered 'fidanzato', ie engaged. So, in these matters, I play my most English hand!' (Naples, 1956).*

## PAESTUM

*Last Tuesday I spent a wonderful day at Paestum. The weather fortunately was kind and so I was able to spend several hours almost in solitude walking through the temples and ruins of the city over 2000 years ago (ie, built in the sixth century BC). Paestum (Greek name Posidonia) lies about 100 km south of here in a plain between the Alban Hills and the sea bounded on the south side by the River Sea Sele which meanders through the plain on its way to the sea. To reach it, if you have no car, it's necessary at this season to endure a tiresome train journey of about three hours, only occasionally relieved by some fine sea views and harbours with fishing craft, etc drawn up along the coast of the Gulf of Naples, because the only train that stops at Paestum is an 'accelerato', i.e. the train that stops at every and some half stations (Spring 1957).*

## SICILY

*My journey in Sicily consisted of a cross-land trip from Palermo to Agrigento, a complete circuit of the island and a return trip to Palermo for the boat to Napoli. This route or method (viz. tourist pullman) was not my original intention but the result of circumstances. I had been given a letter of introduction by my prof to the director of cooks/ wagon lits at Palermo. The letter offered me free transport in his pullman tour if I went to Agrigento to collect it. As*

*travelling is always a heavy item and any form of saving naturally appeals to me, I had to cast down my pseudo cultural pride and accept his generous offer.*

*I found there is a considerable difference between the coast and the interior. All the places of tourist interest (ie the sites of the Greek colonies) lie on the coast. And although nowhere in Sicily are the roads good, they are better here. Sicily is poor, but conditions (because of tourists) appear better than they are. My first impression was of Sicily's similarity with Ireland. This may be only superficial but for me it seemed the truth, and this was the more evident from the interior, my first journey was across the centre of Palermo to Agrigento, like Ireland in relation to England it is Italy's is little and poorer relation. Almost wholly its economy is agricultural, that is some 70–80% of the population or so I would judge work on the land. In the centre sheep are cultivation of plots by 'contadini' who live in houses like the Irish crofters dotted across the countryside, seem the chief 'preoccupation'. The houses are square, poorly built of stone or block often without windows. The bad state of repair of most buildings is everywhere visible; how much the result of war damage and how much natural decay is not easy to say but places like Messina suffered considerable damage in some very heavy fighting and many of the scars of machine guns and tracer bullets are clearly visible.*

*At this time of the year its landscape seemed Irish (or what I know of Ireland from illustration). Barren, rolling, often steep and craggy with the grain on the more fertile parts and the shrubs on the scraggs among which roamed sheep making a brave impression after recent rains to give a fair impression of Ireland's more rugged, but still emerald hills at the end of a dry summer. Agrigento, with its line of majestic temple ruins and the valley of the temples, was probably the finest sight I saw. It is in some ways incredible to me, the paradox that these temples whose prime was so ephemeral should make such permanent monuments as ruins; whose ruins should convey such timelessness (May 1957).*

## HIS FUTURE

*On Sunday, the Reggia (Palace) of Capodimonte was opened as a new museum – the most modern in Europe – housing the Neapolitan picture gallery and on Monday, a conference of the International Chamber of Commerce, the world's businessmen opened. These last 2 events brought David<sup>3</sup> from Rome to report. He was kept quite busy making stories from nothing – press stories don't have the interest of fairy tales mainly because most journalists lack imagination – because his chiefs in London believed a Mr Wyndham White, secretary of GATT would make an important statement. Of course, he iced it for public consumption, so it was accepted without comment. In between his press conferences, interviews and telephones and my odd class we ate or drank coffee together. He has become an extremely able journalist, but I don't envy him his job. It is interesting but it skates across the surface of life – idle words – everything viewed from story value, impact – all these things breed a superficiality, as if life is not tough already. I am as superficial as he is but while this life seems to satisfy him, I find it a void. I sometimes wonder if I will ever find a way of life, worth the belief, an occupation which will absorb all my interests, but there can be no turning back on the road that I have taken (May 1957).*

## ON LEAVING NAPLES IN JUNE 1957

*I look forward to seeing you all in a few days after these months, though it would be untruthful to say I don't have some regrets in leaving Naples. I've grown to love the eternal blues – sky and sea and it is especially galling that summer has finally settled with the eternal sun overhead after an unstable May. I spent today just bathing in sun and sea and was almost content*

*in this inactivity – it is almost impossible in England to imagine just how beautiful the panoramas of the Gulf, Vesuvius, Capri and Ischia, etc. are from any part of the city just now. They are fantastic and will be fantasy from tomorrow. I at least have the satisfaction of knowing that I will never return to Napoli as a stranger, the Neapolitans' incredible kindness have assured that (June 1957).*

If these were some of the images and scenes that he re-saw and re-lived, I do hope, he, as 'a more complete citizen of the world', was satisfied with the rich life he had lived and all that he had contributed to, not only to his family, his many students, and colleagues but also to social sciences in general and to Naples in particular. That would explain his last smile.

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The exceptional figure of Percy Allum was that of a passionate scholar entirely dedicated to his research, who possessed a great capacity for empathy towards the object of his studies, without ever losing sight of his original viewpoint.

His line of interpretation was the fruit of a rare personal sensibility and of a multidisciplinary background. He began his studies with law and history, obtaining a degree from Queens' College, Cambridge in 1956 before going on to study political science and international law at Sciences Po in Paris (1959). In 1965, he completed his D. Phil at Oxford under the supervision of the historian Christopher Seton-Watson and began his teaching career, working at English, French and Italian universities. His final stop was the University of Naples 'L'Orientale' (from 1993 to 2005), a return to the city that was his first and favourite field of research.

It was indeed in Naples that Percy Allum developed most of his research activity and theoretical reflection. His most famous text, *Politics and Society in Postwar Naples* (Cambridge University Press, 1973), is the product of an in-depth analysis, initiated during his doctoral studies and refined over more than a decade of research. Its empirical apparatus is extremely rich, utilising both primary and secondary sources, including electoral data, details of the political class, economic and demographic statistics, biographies, opinion polls, in-depth interviews, newspaper articles, and judicial inquiries. The empirical material is organised into a rigorous, theoretical-interpretative structure which seeks to account for the social and political changes that, in a city undergoing modernisation, were induced by the economic and social transformations of the nation in which it was located. The basic thesis of the text is the existence of a conservative system of power that prevents an adequate representation of the democratic and productive forces of society both in terms of the relation between local and national politics and of the clientelist relation between classes. There is thus a perennial tension between the drive towards innovation (in terms of economic, social, and cultural changes produced by industrialisation) and conservative alliances. One can never be clearly seen prevailing over the other, producing a tension that generates a lasting crisis of the system of political representation and parties. One of the strengths of the text is the way in which it reconstructs the historical transition between the 1950s and 1960s, from Lauro's system of power (the man who became Mayor at the head of a personal party) to Gava's system of power (as the head of the Christian Democrat Party). Here, Allum uses the ideal types of 'boss' and 'machine politics', yet in his analysis he does not simply offer a stylised version of these models. Rather, it is enriched by continuous reference to social and economic

conditions, cultural transformations, and relations with the ruling classes and the powers of government and national politics that explain the transition from the first to the second model. Allum is not interested in abstract social forms, but in historical phenomena located in space and time.

It is a significant piece of research which has had extensive international reach and recognition. Not only has it profoundly influenced studies on the sociology of power and on research approaches to Southern Italy; but it has also marked the political and intellectual development of entire generations of young Neapolitans. It has allowed them to rationalise the local system of power and, in so doing, distance themselves from it and challenge it.

The text is also well-known, especially to critics, for its adoption of the '*Gemeinschaft - Gesellschaft*' dichotomy. It should be noted, however, that this remains in the background of the study and is used only to indicate the tension created by modernisation (meaning the development of the economy and state institutions) to which local society was subjected after the Second World War. It does not resolve the analysis in an evolutionistic sense. On the contrary, it analyses the relations between the economy and politics, both locally and nationally – alongside the processual reconstruction of the dynamics and forms of power as historical phases unfolded – demonstrating a level of detail and variety of outcomes that were quite unique, and which can only be understood in the particular historical conditions that were in the city. From this point of view, Allum's contribution stands at the centre of the scientific debate of those years regarding the relationship between history and social sciences.

How did the author develop this empirical approach in which the case study is the real focus of analysis? It is certain that his travels and the relationship between his academic background and his field of research were fundamental.

Naples, the city he discovered during his youth in the late 1950s, would remain his theoretical and existential reference point throughout his life, to the point of becoming 'his' adopted city. The letters he sent to his parents in 1956–1958 during his first stay in Naples – to '*become a more complete citizen of the world*' – demonstrate his fascination towards this 'exotic' place. It differed from his comfort zone and his learning environment and was therefore interesting from an intellectual point of view. At the same time, the style of the letters testifies to a strong bond with Naples, one which is even stronger than the simple relationship between a scholar and his field of research. The description of places, landscapes, colours and sites of historical interest; the empathy with social circumstances observed; the interest in people and life stories; and the friendships and ties built over time constitute the cultural and existential baggage with which Allum read and experienced the city. They were also the basis of his precise research choices. In the light of this, it cannot be said that Naples was his 'object' of research. In his profound relationship with the city, in his attitude as a man engaged in political and civic debates, lies something deeper than the instrumental relationship of the scholar with his case study. In other words, in his work, his relationship with the field of research is never instrumental – it is not directed towards an external, so to speak, scientific objective. In his attempt to give an account of the transformations of the city and the political power dynamics Allum does not intend to pander to general theories. The city is not a testing ground for abstract models; his position is not deductive. Rather, his analysis starts from the question posed by the concrete case study. The theory is adapted to the explanations provided to these questions inserted clearly in the specific framework of his research.

Unlike other scholars of his generation, Allum does not adopt a comparative approach. In those years, international political studies suffered from the classical approach of the modernisation theory. These studies were largely orientated towards constructing typologies that classified different societies according to set 'stages of development' from a

comparative perspective. The comparative approach practised during those years entailed a significant over-simplification of the specific features of the case studies used. This method of understanding case studies sought to obtain a mechanistic explanation, isolating variables that, together, determined the level of development of different societies. In studies influenced by US functionalism in particular, this approach explained the development lag by linking it to the absence of certain qualities within local populations in terms of mentality, values, and political culture. For example, the work of Almond and Verba<sup>4</sup> on political participation, categorised the Italian case as ‘parochial’, i.e., as characterised by a political culture limited to the sphere of family or friendship and incapable of rationalising the broader dimension of the common good. In this way, the functional theory remained prisoner of an ethnocentric paradigm that, in comparative simplification, ranked the case studies according to a hierarchy of modernity and, ultimately, according to a system of classification based on morality.

Percy Allum’s work could not start from this basis, primarily because his academic background was richer and more multidisciplinary. His study of history and law had allowed him to develop a conception of human variety and social systems that could not be reduced to functionalist and comparative simplifications. But one could also say that this also occurred for moral, sentimental reasons: his profound relationship with Italy, and with Naples in particular, established a sharing of destinies and future horizons. Through this, and despite the diversity of the environment to which Allum was an outsider, the ‘anthropological’ distance between the researcher and his research environment (that lies beneath the rigid versions of the modernisation theory) was undone. In short, Percy Allum’s unique cultural background prevented his work from falling victim to the trap of ‘Orientalism’.<sup>5</sup>

On the other hand, he had a significant relationship with the Neapolitan intelligentsia; his articles appeared frequently in the local press; and his investigations into electoral results and politics were published in many local, national, and international scientific journals. As evidence of his authentic relationship with the city, and unlike many authors who have constructed their studies on the foundation of second-hand information, he never lived in the city as a tourist. In the 1960s, he taught in a secondary school as an English-language assistant before becoming full professor at the University of Naples ‘L’Orientale’ where he taught Political Science from 1993 until his retirement in 2005.

As a teacher, Allum was empathetic towards students, colleagues, and younger researchers. Gifted with a rare human quality that was certainly foreign to the haughty Italian universities, he possessed a light-hearted manner that made him alien to the factional games that also characterise the academic world. His way of working was kind and original. For instance, he carefully avoided academic pomposity. In his contributions to scientific conferences, during which he presented his topic of discussion without seeming excessively convinced about it, he approached it with a polite, self-ironical perplexity that was in fact an integral part of his empirical approach. He was generous in sharing material and ideas with early career scholars and retained youthful enthusiasm that he poured into his research, even in the final years of his activity.

*Politics and Society in Postwar Naples* and subsequent writings had a pivotal impact on the city, academia, and the political world. The book was disruptive in terms of its content, but above all, it was a significant innovation in the method of analysing politics. It featured a working methodology that was by no means taken for granted in the intellectual community of those years, dominated still in the social sciences by an idealist philosophy that undervalued empirical data and fieldwork. From this perspective, Percy Allum was a clean break, initiating a new wave of study on Southern Italy undertaken by a large group of scholars from Anglo-Saxon backgrounds (Anton Blok, Jane and Peter Schneider, and

Thomas Belmonte for example) as well as interpreters of social science at the intersection of several disciplines: history, anthropology, sociology, and political science.

This was the first time that the city was confronted with its own image, reconstructed through a rigorous investigation of its economically productive, social, cultural, and political features. The debate was bitter but healthy, involving intellectuals and politicians, and forcing the entire city to come to terms with this faithful representation of itself, bereft of folklore and justificationism. Obviously as a result, Percy Allum suffered a certain ostracism from the political ruling class, to which he ironically responded with numerous drawings depicting Antonio Gava's power-drunk face against the backdrop of a myriad of cubes, representing the stylised excrescences of the city's speculative buildings.

Drawing, another of Percy Allum's passions, revealed his sensibility and talent: Provençal landscapes, Venetian panoramas, but above all Neapolitan houses, either brightly coloured or black and white, which he used to give as postcard-size gifts to friends on festive occasions. He exhibited them in recent years in Naples, Vicenza, Sanary-sur-mer and Reading, the city where he spent his final years with his family.

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## Notes

1. See 2022. 'Morto Percy Allum, lo specchio del potere a Napoli'. *Il Mattino*, 29 April [https://www.ilmattino.it/napoli/cultura/percy\\_allum\\_morto\\_potere\\_napoli-6657252.html](https://www.ilmattino.it/napoli/cultura/percy_allum_morto_potere_napoli-6657252.html); 2022. 'Da Gava a De Luca, la profezia di Percy Allum'. *Il Corriere del Mezzogiorno*, 1 May [https://corrieredelmezzogiorno.corriere.it/napoli/politica/22\\_maggio\\_01/da-gava-de-luca-profezia-percy-allum-d9909b52-c913-11ec-ad98-eb84e5ac6cc2.shtml](https://corrieredelmezzogiorno.corriere.it/napoli/politica/22_maggio_01/da-gava-de-luca-profezia-percy-allum-d9909b52-c913-11ec-ad98-eb84e5ac6cc2.shtml); 2022. 'Percy Allum: gli anni a "Repubblica", la denuncia politica e l'amore per Napoli'. *La Repubblica*, Napoli, 1 May [https://napoli.repubblica.it/comments/2022/05/01/news/percy\\_allum\\_gli\\_anni\\_a\\_repubblica\\_la\\_denuncia\\_politica\\_e\\_lamore\\_per\\_napoli-347676180/](https://napoli.repubblica.it/comments/2022/05/01/news/percy_allum_gli_anni_a_repubblica_la_denuncia_politica_e_lamore_per_napoli-347676180/)
2. Percy was a great letter writer. Here, extracts from letters from Sept 1956–June 1957 his first stay in Naples. They have not been archived properly yet.
3. David Willey, university friend and British journalist who was a Reuter trainee in Rome at the time.
4. Almond, G.A., and Verba, S. 1963. *The Civic Culture*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
5. Said, E.W. 1978. *Orientalism*. New York: Pantheon Books.

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